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26TH OCT 2012 | 20 NOTES

RAW VERSUS COOKED FOODS: PERHAPS THE MOST CONTROVERSIAL CURRENT TOPIC IN THE PET WORLD (PART I)

As feeding raw has increased in popularity over the past decade, so has the debate about whether a raw diet is more beneficial than a cooked or commercially prepared diet and whether feeding raw food to our companion animals is safe. This debate has become even more polarized in recent months with position statements issued by the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#) (AVMA) and the [American Animal Hospital Association](#) (AAHA), the two primary small animal veterinary medical associations in the United States. The statements issued by these organizations make it clear they are against the feeding of a raw food diet to our companion animals. The AVMA and AAHA cite safety concerns – not just for the animals, but for the people in the households, as well as the public at large. The [AVMA FAQs](#) explain its rationale.

So, given these strong positions, what is my take on the issues surrounding the raw diet controversy? Let's take a look at some facts:

Fact: Many of us in the veterinary community, including myself, have seen first-hand the health and vigor of dogs and cats fed raw diets. These animals just 'shine' in all respects. While these observations are shared by a growing number of animal health care professionals as well as experienced dog and cat fanciers, they could be considered as merely anecdotal. Perhaps so, but I consider them experiential findings based on years of observations by many dedicated professionals in the holistic veterinary field. I believe, therefore, that to criticize all raw diets on the basis that they are inherently harmful is misleading, and conveys an inflexible message.

Fact: Veterinarians speaking on behalf of the AVMA have stated that the commercial pet food industry has a 'zero-tolerance' policy for Salmonella in kibbled products, creating the impression

that this same zero-tolerance would not pertain to commercial raw diets. This is false.

Whereas the USDA actually has an acceptable threshold of Salmonella in meat sold for human consumption (Yes, that's correct! You could be buying Salmonella-contaminated beef or poultry for your family!), it is the FDA's Center for Veterinary Medicine that controls the pet food industry, and this organization mandates a zero-tolerance policy of Salmonella for all pet foods, not just 'cooked' products.

As anyone who follows pet food recalls knows, commercially produced kibbled products and treats are recalled on a regular basis due to contamination with Salmonella and E. coli (Campylobacter is also of concern).

Fact: Larger producers of raw pet foods incorporate a 'kill-step' into their production process to eliminate pathogens while creating the least impact on the food's enzymes, proteins and other nutrients. One such method involves high pressure processing (HPP), which works by using intense pressure rather than heat to kill the pathogens including E. coli, Salmonella and Listeria. HPP also kills yeasts and molds.

These raw food manufacturers also test each batch of food before releasing it into the marketplace. As per the FDA's zero-tolerance policy for all pet foods (including raw foods), these products must test negative for pathogens before they go out. Any raw food manufacturer that releases food with Salmonella in the product is not abiding by the FDA's regulatory guidelines.

That said, there are many "mom and pop" producers of raw foods, and these companies may not employ a 'kill step' to eliminate pathogens, or fail to test each batch of their product to ensure it is pathogen-free. So, prior to feeding your pet any raw food, be sure to contact the manufacturer and ask them what steps they take to ensure your pet's food is free of Salmonella and other pathogens.

It is true that not all animals thrive on raw diets (or any specific diet, for that matter), and not all animals can tolerate them, especially if they have a history of bowel disorders. In addition, people feeding a raw diet to their pets must follow common sense hygienic procedures to avoid potential contamination of utensils and surfaces and to ensure the safety of the humans in the household.

Nutritionally, raw diets are the most wholesome, followed by dehydrated, freeze-dried and fresh, home cooked, properly balanced diets. Premium quality commercial kibbled and canned food diets are the next tier of the pet food chain, especially those that are grain- or gluten- free.

While the recent position statements of the AVMA and AAHA have angered many people dedicated to feeding their pets a raw diet, it is important to understand that these statements in no way limit your rights – that is, unless your pet is a therapy dog or cat. Many raw-fed therapy animals are no longer welcome in hospitals, nursing homes or other such facilities due to the potential increased risk of illness for seniors or those with compromised immune systems.

Finally, remember that pets (and people) can be carriers of bacterial pathogens like Salmonella, E.coli and Campylobacter whether they eat raw, cooked or kibbled meats. Our bodies and excrement are never sterile, nor were they intended to be!

In Part 2 of our raw foods blog, we will delve further into the differences between commercial raw foods processed using HPP and those that are non-HPP, as well as how they compare to home-made raw diets. We will also address the confusion that often exists concerning dehydrated and

freeze-dried diets.

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